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State of Illinois

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Burn Barrels – Your Questions Answered



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Backyard Burn Barrels - Are They Safe?

Why should I be concerned about the open burning of household waste?

The nature of household trash has changed over the past fifty years. Today, bleached paper, plastic packaging or plastic products and printed materials with toxic chemicals make up a large portion of society's waste. These items contain chemical dyes, coatings, pigments and chlorine that can form even more toxic chemicals when burned. In fact, chlorine is present in most household waste, even paper products.

What pollutants are emitted from open burning?

An estimated 5,000 tons of pollutants are emitted annually from open burning of household waste. Particulates, sulfur dioxide and carbon monoxide represent the largest portion of these pollutants. Because burn barrels receive little oxygen, they create low temperature fires that generate other toxic pollutants such as benzene, styrene oxide, formaldehyde, dioxins and furans. Dioxins are produced in burn barrels at levels more than two times greater (per ton of refuse) than from municipal incinerators. Some metals such as lead, cadmium and chromium are also released.

Can these chemical emissions harm my family's health?

Yes. These pollutants are released into the air where they can be inhaled by those closest to or downwind from the source. They also deposit on leafy plants that are eaten by livestock. Dioxin accumulates in animal fat and is passed through meat and dairy products to humans. Depending on

how long and how often you are exposed, certain pollutants can harm the lungs, kidneys, the nervous system and the liver. Short-term exposure can aggravate asthma and affect other respiratory conditions. Long-term exposure can lead to an increased risk of cancer, heart disease, and respiratory, reproductive and developmental problems.

What cannot be burned in a burn barrel?

Open burning of garbage is prohibited in Illinois. Landscape waste, garbage (food waste, food or plastic packaging and diapers), trade waste (construction debris, roofing materials), used furniture, appliances and automobile parts are not considered household waste and may not be burned. However, you can burn household waste generated from a single home, depending on where you live.

Where can a burn barrel be used?

You can burn your household waste only on the premises where it is generated and outside any restricted area. A restricted area is defined as any city, village or incorporated township, plus a zone extending one mile beyond the boundaries where there is a population of 1,000 or more. Do not overload the burn barrel, so more oxygen can reach the fire to burn safely.

Household waste is defined as waste generated from a single home, but does not include landscape waste, garbage (food waste, food or plastic, plastic packaging and diapers), trade waste (construction debris, roofing materials), used furniture, appliances or automobile parts.

• ***Note: State Law is applicable unless there is a more restrictive local prohibition or limitation on open burning.***

What can I do to help?

Contact a local garbage hauler about disposal options.

REDUCE extra packaging by buying in bulk. Avoid buying disposable items; buy durable, repairable items.

REUSE by donating unwanted clothing, furniture, toys and electronics to friends or charities. Give old magazines and books to hospitals or nursing homes. Repair rather than discard or replace.



RECYCLE junk mail, magazines, newspapers, office paper, cardboard, aluminum, tin, metal and acceptable plastics. Return plastic bags to stores that recycle them.

COMPOST food and lawn and garden waste.

Why should I stop burning?

- Burn barrels are the most significant remaining source of dioxin in the U.S. and produce a variety of other toxins.
- Your individual choices impact the quality of everyone's food supply.
- Your health and the health of your family and neighbors may depend on it.
- There is a risk of forest fires in some areas from uncontrolled open burning.
- You may be breaking the law.

“Uncontrolled combustion such as burning of household waste is expected to become the largest quantified source of dioxin emissions to the environment.”

**U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
“Dioxin: Scientific Highlights from Draft
Reassessment (2000).”**

www.epa.gov/ncea/dioxin.htm (25 May 2001).

For more information:

**U.S. Environmental
Protection Agency**

www.epa.gov

**Great Lakes Trash and Open
Burning**

www.openburning.org

**Illinois Environmental
Protection Agency**

www.epa.state.il.us

Questions about disposal issues

217/785-8604

Questions about burning

217/782-7027

Illinois Dept. of Public Health

www.idph.state.il.us

Division of Environmental Health

217/782-5830

**Your local fire marshal or fire department
can also answer questions about risks from
open burning.**

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